

## The Wedding Party

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The women met in Mma-Millipede's yard. All the women of the village were there, drinking tea and shouting happily to each other. Everyone had brought something to throw into the big cooking pots. As they peeled hundreds of potatoes, goats rushed up, bleating and pushing, to eat the skins.

Paulina was telling everyone what to do. Each person had a special job. Some put fat into the big pots. Then others cut meat and threw it into the pots. The rest of the women were peeling potatoes as fast as they possibly could. Even the goats began to eat more quickly.

Then one woman said, in a voice everyone could hear, 'What about that handsome foreigner who's working on the farm?'

'I wonder if he's married!' called out another.

'Why don't you ask Paulina Sebeso,' said a third. 'She's the clever one here!'

'I don't know anything about him,' Paulina said, trying to speak calmly.

'But you have eyes,' the first woman said. 'Haven't you seen how good-looking he is?'

'I don't spend all my time looking at men,' Paulina said quickly.

The women looked at each other.

'Don't be angry Paulina,' one woman said. 'We wanted to know what you thought.'

Paulina was angry with herself. She knew that the women had been joking. The women listened to Paulina because she was clever and brave and honest. But they could not understand why she had not got a lover or a husband of her own. So Paulina went on stirring the pots and did not say

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any more.

The women began talking about Maria and Gilbert. At this very moment, they were being married in the office of George Appleby-Smith.

'I say that Maria's a lucky girl,' one woman said. 'She'll have a comfortable life now. We all know that white men make a lot of money!'

'Do you think that's why she married him?'

'Perhaps. But we'll never know. Maria will never tell us.'

Paulina had also thought about this.

'You shouldn't talk about people who are not here,' she said.

'My goodness, Paulina Sebeso, you are in a bad temper today!' one woman called out. 'Aren't you feeling well? Have you got a pain? Near your heart<sup>32</sup>, perhaps?'

And all the women laughed so much that Paulina had to laugh too.

By midday, the food was ready. Gilbert and Maria arrived. Maria was wearing a new cotton dress and everyone looked at her. She was so shy that she tried to hide behind Mma-Millipede.

Paulina looked at Makhaya. She noticed how carefully he listened to people. But he never looked at anyone.

Gilbert took a stool and sat beside Mma-Millipede. Dinorego was sitting next to Makhaya. He began to talk to him.

'I'm happy Maria has married Gilbert,' the old man said. 'He will stay here now and things will go on getting better. Why don't you marry too, son? You must talk to Mma-Millipede.'

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She'll help you find someone.'

Mma-Millipede was looking at Paulina. Paulina's big, black eyes were looking at Makhaya.

'She's going to make herself unhappy,' the old woman thought. 'Paulina is a woman who can only love one man. She won't want to live if anyone else looks at Makhaya.'

Mma-Millipede sighed<sup>33</sup>. She wished she knew more about Makhaya.

Even on his wedding-day, Gilbert could not stop talking about his plans for the village.

'These women will be able to help me,' he told Mma-Millipede. 'I want them to grow cash-crops<sup>34</sup>. The crops can be sold to buy tools and more seed. Everyone will have enough to eat and life will get better.'

'Tobacco will be an easy crop to grow,' Gilbert went on. 'Each woman can grow, pick and dry the tobacco leaves herself. Then all the leaves could be sold together. Can you persuade the women to do this, Mama?'

'It's a good idea, my son,' the old woman said. 'But someone must tell them what to do. Will you?'

'No, not me. Makhaya will tell them what to do. I've got to look after the farm. But he will enjoy teaching the women.'

Mma-Millipede was thinking quickly to herself. If Paulina Sebeso agrees to grow tobacco, all the other women would agree too. But then Paulina would be working with Makhaya. Would that be a good thing?

At last, Mma-Millipede said quietly to Gilbert, 'Is Makhaya an honest man?'

Gilbert looked at her.

'Of course. Makhaya is one of the most honest men I know.'



*Paulina's big, black eyes were looking at Makhaya.*

He is a good friend.'

'Then I know who can get things started,' Mma-Millipede said. 'I'll speak to her straight away.'

And she walked across to Paulina, who was still looking at Makhaya.

Gilbert turned to look at Maria. He could not believe he was married to her at last. He took Maria's hand in his.

'What are you thinking about?' he asked her quietly.

Maria looked at her husband.

'Are you going back to England one day?' she asked.

Gilbert smiled at her.

'I might have to,' he answered.

'Then you will have to go by yourself.'

'Don't you love me then?' asked Gilbert.

'Of course I do,' Maria answered quickly. 'But I wouldn't feel free there.'

Gilbert remembered his life in England. He had never felt free there. His home was in Africa now. He had work to do in Golema Mmidi. But he pretended to be angry.

'You're not Dinorego's daughter now,' he said. 'You're my wife. If I go back to England, so do you.'

And Maria answered quietly, 'I didn't say I wouldn't obey you, Gilbert. I just wanted to know what you thought.'

Suddenly, Gilbert felt sad. The winter sky was bright and clear. The bright, sunny sky reminded him of summer days in England.

Gilbert stood up and held out his hand to Maria. Together, they walked far into the bush, where the little birds were all singing quietly together.



*Together, they walked far into the bush.*